

Ballot Measure # 2

Should every eligible citizen be required to vote?

Background

Taking part in elections to choose the people who will represent us in government is one of the most important things we do in a democracy. The opportunity to vote is one of our most treasured rights, but should it be an obligation of every American citizen to exercise that right?

Beyond the question of our rights and obligations, voting gives every citizen a voice in shaping the future of their community, state and nation. Whether it's a debate over building a new park versus a parking lot, making college more affordable or charging higher student fees, improving the quality of our air and water or leaving them as they are awhile longer, people who vote have a seat at the debate table.

Declining Voter Turnout

Despite the impact voting has on decisions made by our government and on people's everyday lives, a vast number of eligible voters do not participate in the process on a regular basis. Consider the following voter turnout statistics:

- **General Voters:** During the presidential election of 2004, only 64 percent of voting-age citizens participated. While this is an increase from those who voted in 2000, the participation levels were still below the rates in 1992, when 68 percent of voting-age citizens participated in the presidential election.¹
- **Younger Voters:** In the 2004 presidential and 2006 mid-term elections, a slight increase in voter turnout was seen among young people in the 18-29 age group but, historically, voting participation among young adults in America has declined steadily since 1972. On average, young people's voting participation falls 20 percent below participation by older adults, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement. California data shows that only 6 out of every 10 eligible adults younger than 25 even registers to vote.
- **California Voters:** The number of registered voters in the state has dropped by nearly one million in the past two years, with only 69 percent of all eligible people registered.² Furthermore, California ranks in the top five of states with the highest *decline* in voter participation among ages 18 to 24 from 1972 to 2004 according to the Census Bureau. Likely voters in California tend to be older, more educated and wealthier than those who are not registered or do not participate regularly.³

¹ *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004*, March 2006, US Census Bureau

² *Report of Registration*, March 17, 2007, Secretary of State

³ *California's Likely Voters*, August 2006, Public Policy Institute of California, www.ppic.org

Reasons Given for Not Voting

Those who do not vote have various reasons for not participating. When registered nonvoters were surveyed by the U.S. Census Bureau after the 2004 election, 20 percent explained they were too busy or had a conflicting work or school schedule, 15 percent said they were ill, disabled, or had a family emergency while 11 percent said they were not interested in the election or felt their vote would not make a difference. Other reasons included being out of town, not liking the candidates, confusion about voting or registration, forgetting to vote, and having transportation problems.

Young people have their own reasons for not participating in the political process. When surveyed, 64 percent of young people agreed with the statement that “government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, not for the benefit of all,” while only 31 percent of surveyed college students said that all or most members of Congress are honest and trustworthy.⁴

The feeling that no one in government listens to them, so their votes won’t make a difference, is a big part of why many young people don’t vote. The irony of the disappointing youth voter turnout numbers is that young people would have a far stronger voice in government if they informed themselves on the issues and exercised their right to vote. Here are some examples of how the course of history can change when a small number of people decide to vote:

- James Henry “Jim” Webb, Jr. was elected to the U.S. Senate from the State of Virginia in 2006 when he received only a half-percent more votes than his opponent, George Allen, out of the nearly 2.5 million that were cast statewide.⁵ Following his victory, Senator Webb, a Democrat, cast the final vote needed to give the Democratic party control of the U.S. Senate for the first time since 2001.⁶
- Christine Gregoire was elected Governor of the state of Washington in 2004, when, after the second, and final, official ballot recount, she had received only 129 more votes than her opponent, Dino Rossi, out of the nearly 2.5 million ballots cast.⁷

⁴ Panetta Institute Survey, June 13, 2006

⁵ Virginia Board of Elections

http://www2.sbe.virginia.gov/web_docs/Election/results/2006/Nov/htm/index.htm

⁶ CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/11/09/va.senate/index.html>

⁷ Washington Secretary of State, http://www.secstate.wa.gov/elections/2004gov_race.aspx

- Nicole Parra was first elected to the California Assembly in 2002 when she received only 187 more votes than her opponent, Dean Gardner, during an election in which 52,00 people cast ballots.⁸
- Congresswoman Jane Harman (D-California), who was first elected to represent the 36th District in 1992, held onto her post at the next election in 1994 when she received only 812 more votes than her opponent, Susan Brooks, out of a total of 196,000 ballots cast.⁹
- George Duekmejian became Governor of California in 1982 by earning only 1.2 percent more of the nearly 8 million votes cast statewide in that election than his opponent, Tom Bradley.¹⁰

Required Voting

Low voter participation has prompted some countries to require all eligible citizens to vote, also known as “compulsory voting.” In fact, it’s estimated that 24 countries, or 17% of the world’s democracies, require citizens to vote, including Australia, Argentina and Italy.¹¹ The punishment for not voting in countries with compulsory voting ranges from a fine to imprisonment, and can include the loss of access to public services for those who don’t participate. Some countries strongly enforce their compulsory voting laws while others do not. Regardless, even in countries that don’t strictly enforce their required voting laws, 20 to 30 percent more citizens vote in their elections than take part in our elections in the United States.

Resources

Overview of Compulsory Voting Worldwide

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)
http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm

Turnout In The World – Country-By-Country Performance

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)
http://www.idea.int/vt/survey/voter_turnout_pop2.cfm

America Votes: The Big Picture

League of Women Voters

www.grassrootspower.org/images/bigpicture.pdf

⁸ JoinCalifornia, <http://www.joincalifornia.com/election/2002-11-05>

⁹ JoinCalifornia, <http://www.joincalifornia.com/election/1994-11-08>

¹⁰ JoinCalifornia, <http://www.joincalifornia.com/election/1982-11-02>

¹¹ *Compulsory Voting*, December 1, 2004, Simon Jackman

Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004

US Census Bureau

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>

Key Terms

Compulsory Voting: A practice that requires citizens to vote in elections as a mandatory civic duty. Citizens who do not vote in compulsory voting countries where the law is strongly enforced may be subject to punishments such as fines, community service, or imprisonment.

Democracy: Government by the people in which the supreme power is exercised directly by them or by those they elect to represent them.

Electorate: All the people in a country who are eligible to vote in an election.

Pros & Cons

There are several arguments for and against laws making voting mandatory. Consider the following points:

Pro argument:

Required Voting

Advocates of compulsory voting argue that, if democracy is defined as “government by the people,” then it is every citizen's responsibility to participate in voting and in electing their representatives. Outcomes of elections are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate. Furthermore, using compulsory voting to improve voter turnout provides for a more balanced, racially, culturally and economically diverse electorate. Lastly, without the need to urge citizens to vote, money that used to be spent persuading voters to go to the polls could be invested in programs to help them become better informed on the issues and the candidates for public office.

Con argument:

vs. Voting by Choice

Opponents of compulsory voting argue that such laws diminish the very freedom that is associated with democracy. Furthermore, reports show that an increased number of invalid and blank votes are present in countries that require voting compared with countries that have no compulsory voting laws. Some voters may resent being forced to vote, and may fulfill their obligation with little thought to the issues at stake, simply to fulfill their civic duty and avoid punishment. Those who oppose mandatory voting say that better civic education is needed to increase voter participation, and that the political process isn't helped by forcing people to vote who aren't properly informed on the issues, have little interest in elections, or both.

Resources

Support For Required Voting:

Is It Time To Consider Mandatory Voting Laws?

Find Law, February 2003

<http://writ.news.findlaw.com/dean/20030228.html>

Vote — Or Else

Norman Ornstein

August 10, 2006

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/10/opinion/10ornstein.html?_r=1&emc=eta1&oref=slogin

Opposition To Required Voting:

Poll: Americans Oppose Compulsory Voting

Dalia Sussman, June 11, 2004

<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=120577&page=1>

Should Voting Be Mandatory?

(Readers' responses to **Vote — Or Else**)

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